

NNewsline

*Delivering Technology Access to
America's Communities*



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IRM's Job-Training Program: A Formula That Works

“Our goal is to help residents become upwardly mobile and acquire the skills needed to compete in today's job market,” says Jacqueline Jones, vice president for social services at Interstate Realty Management (IRM) Company. “We want them to earn a viable income—not just minimum wage jobs, but jobs with benefits and potential growth,” she said, referring to the mission of the job-training program at IRM's 23 Neighborhood Networks centers.

Since launching its 13-week job-training program in 1996, IRM has helped 1,100 people find employment as clerical staff, cashiers, bankers, teachers, legal assistants, real estate managers, computer instructors, social services personnel, and more. According to Jones, resident participation is strong. Depending on residents' needs and availability, many centers offer early morning and afternoon sessions, and others offer night sessions. Conducted by computer instructors, volunteers, and outside experts, the program has three vital components: basic education, computer technology training, and life-skills training.

Start With the Basics

Some of the residents participating in IRM's job-training program dropped out of school at an early age while others function at a higher level. Center staff first conduct an education assessment to determine the literacy level of each participant. To pass the general equivalency diploma (GED), participants often must improve their reading, writing, and mathematics skills. IRM centers use basic education software that incorporates mathematics, English, science, and social studies programs and allows participants to progress at their own pace. The software also has a problem-solving component that helps participants identify common workforce conflicts and challenges and find solutions.

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In addition to the education assessment, staff use Career WAYS and Career Vision software to help participants identify their employment needs, career interests and requirements, personal interests, and short- and long-term goals. According to Debra Nicholson of Atlantic Villas Community Learning Center in Atlantic City, New Jersey, "If they are employed in a position they really want and like, they are likely to remain there for a while."

After the career and personal assessments, participants are given a list of jobs—compatible with their personalities—to research information such as skill requirements. Center staff then gear their training toward these requirements.

Bridge the Technology Gap

"Center staff take students with little or no knowledge of computers and help them attain a high level of proficiency," says Annie Foster of IRM's Montgomery Townhouses Neighborhood Networks Center in Philadelphia. "Instructors first assess the computer literacy level of each participant to ensure that classes are geared toward their needs and abilities. Then they instruct students in basic computer training, including computer terminology, using the Internet, and using software." Participants explore various components of each program such as how to create spreadsheets, business cards, and letterhead. Some centers employ the easy-to-use, self-paced tutorials that allow participants to choose topics from managing e-mail and customizing forms to word processing or using graphics.



Wister Townhouses (Managed by Interstate Realty Management), a 2002 Neighborhood Networks Graduating Class. Freda Whitehead instructor.

Life-Skills Training

As part of the program, participants are taught skills such as creating a professional résumé, following interview techniques, and dressing for success, as well as how to take direction, resolve conflict, and identify and overcome barriers to employment.

Through partnerships with the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, the Pension and Welfare Benefits Administration, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Employment and Training Administration, the Social Security Administration, and HUD, some centers have incorporated a financial literacy pilot program using Money Smart. This program teaches participants financial management skills and addresses issues such as opening checking and savings accounts, establishing a budget, submitting required IRS forms, learning about the earned income credit, and more. Nicholson believes that "if participants are whole and satisfied in their personal life, it will help them be better employees. Our training addresses their educational and social needs."

Developing a Program

"Before starting a job-training program, try to link with employers and tailor the program sessions based on their needs, so that when students graduate, there are jobs for them," says Jones. "For example, if an employer stipulates that applicants must type a certain number of words [per minute], tailor the program to ensure that participants qualify."

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The Hard Facts About Soft Skills

Public Relations—Administrative

Busy, downtown PR firm seeks take-charge, organized, detail-oriented individual for executive assistant position. Successful candidate will have at least 5 years' experience working with senior executives, strong Microsoft Office skills, strong communication and interpersonal skills, and problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Must be flexible, highly motivated self-starter with ability to manage multiple tasks. Competitive salary, great benefits. Fax résumé with references to (555) 555-5555.

Have you read the employment section of a newspaper lately? If you have, you are familiar with the language used in this advertisement. Requirements such as those outlined above are standard for almost any job announcement. By asking potential employees to possess such qualities, employers are acknowledging that these soft skills are essential for effective performance in the workplace.

Defining Soft Skills

What are soft skills and how do they affect hiring, promotion, and other aspects of employment? Getting a handle on this term may be challenging. Soft items are hard to quantify, often are based on perception, yield readily to pressure or weight, and lack strength. When you combine the word *soft* with the word *skills*, which is defined as proficiency and ability, the term *soft skills* is confusing.

However, soft skills are essential skills. They are the nontechnical skills, abilities, and traits that workers need to function in an employment environment to:

- ◆ Deliver information or services to customers and coworkers.
- ◆ Work effectively as a member of a team.
- ◆ Learn or acquire the technical skills necessary to perform a task.
- ◆ Inspire the confidence of supervisors and management.
- ◆ Understand and adapt to the cultural norms of the workplace.

These skills fall into the following four categories:

- ◆ **Problem-solving and other cognitive skills** involve the identification of problems and the formulation and evaluation of alternative solutions by weighing risks and benefits.
- ◆ **Oral communication skills** include the ability to speak and comprehend, give and understand instructions, and communicate in ways appropriate to the situation and the audience.
- ◆ **Personal qualities and work ethic** include self-esteem, self-management, emotional maturity, responsibility, and motivation.
- ◆ **Interpersonal and teamwork skills** are the skills needed to negotiate with others, participate as a member of a team, serve clients and customers in a way that meets their expectations, and resolve conflicts maturely.

Soft Skills Affect Hiring, Retention, and Promotion

National studies consistently find that employers list skills in communication, interpersonal relationships, and problem solving, as well as personal qualities such as self-esteem and motivation, as critical for workforce productivity. People often lose jobs not because they lack specific technical skills but because they lack soft skills. According to the Welfare to Work Partnership, a lack of interpersonal and other soft skills is a major barrier that employers do not believe they can address without help. In a survey conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI),

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researchers found that a positive attitude and reliability are the two qualities that employers identify as most important when hiring someone for entry-level work.

Other desirable soft skills include working in teams, communicating and presenting information, focusing on results, research techniques, demonstrating self-confidence and personal drive, influencing others, self-management, thinking and decisionmaking, business awareness, and foreign language skills.

Teaching Soft Skills

Soft skills are acquired over time and through experience. Low-income and minority individuals who lack sufficient labor market experience may not have had the developmental opportunities to acquire soft skills. Since these skills can be learned, there are effective ways to help people acquire them.

A job-readiness curriculum that emphasizes employability skills is one approach. However, teaching social skills may be difficult due to the artificial nature of a classroom or workshop environment. Therefore, centers with employment-related services should structure programs to simulate the workplace.

In addition, postemployment activities such as case management, support groups, mentoring, and job coaching can provide participants with opportunities to work on soft skills based on work-related experiences.

Two national programs that have invested in successfully helping jobseekers acquire soft skills suitable for the workplace are Goodwill Industries International (through the development and refinement of its career development curriculum) and STRIVE, a program that helps people acquire the attitudes that employers prize in new workers. Both programs have local affiliates.

Goodwill Industries International. Soft-skills training helps clients maintain a positive outlook and build successful workplace relationships. Studies reveal that companies are more willing to hire and

train employees who understand basic concepts such as time management, dependability, problem solving, and customer service. Through the use of Goodwill Works and other field-tested resources, clients can develop the behavioral, life management, and interpersonal skills that enable them to become confident and productive members of their community.

STRIVE. This intensive, 3- to 4-week attitudinal-training program emphasizes the development of the soft skills needed to obtain and retain jobs. Through a simulated work environment, participants learn how to follow instructions, accept criticism, and function as team members. Stressing accountability, positive self-presentation, and other qualities as key to success in the workplace, the training also encourages participants to think about job advancement and long-term careers.

For more information on soft-skills training programs at local Goodwill Industries agencies and at STRIVE affiliates, visit their respective Web sites at www.goodwill.org and www.strivenational.org/strive.html. For information on individual training services, visit your local Goodwill agency.

Demonstrating Soft Skills in an Interview

Soft skills are difficult to measure. Employers must rely on body language and facial expressions to assess qualities such as self-esteem and motivation. During a job interview, individuals are evaluated on their ability to handle pressure as well as their qualifications, skills, and intellectual abilities. Interviewers will probe deeply to determine attitudes and motivation, competence, and professionalism. They will see this in the way an individual answers questions. To appear confident, intelligent and quick-thinking jobseekers should research information such as the company's services, products, and growth potential, and prepare questions beforehand. ♦

From Our Guest Columnist

Carmen Porco is director of housing for five properties in Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Three of these properties have established Neighborhood Networks community learning centers. He is a hands-on individual with a passion for revitalizing disenfranchised communities. In this interview, Porco discusses the job-training program at his Neighborhood Networks centers and offers advice for centers interested in starting such a program.

NNewsline: Tell us something about yourself and what made you interested in starting a Neighborhood Networks center.

Porco: I grew up in Wierton, West Virginia, a poor community in a large steel mill town. My interest in low-income communities and my desire to find a way to make a difference in these communities stems from my own childhood. Early on, I recognized that not only are individuals within these communities disenfranchised, but the institutions within the communities are as well. After graduation from theological school, I joined the housing ministries of American Baptist Churches, USA. My job was to revitalize troubled developments. I am motivated by the need for social and economic justice. I feel that America does not live up to its ideals when it comes to serving low-income communities. We talk a language of self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and empowerment, but we do not trust the persons in the communities with the resources to design their own destinies.

NNewsline: Tell us about your centers and some of the programs you offer.

Porco: We have the Northport and Packers Community Learning Centers in Madison, Wisconsin, and the Greentree-Teutonia Neighborhood Networks Community Learning Center in Milwaukee. All of our centers embrace the same philosophy, transforming housing management into a human service institution and focusing on community management of education and employment resources. The following program base exists at all three centers: all-day child-care, Head Start classes, an Even Start program for

early childhood education and development, after-school technology and education programs, scholarship programs focusing on college preparation and middle school children, adult education, general equivalency diploma (GED) classes, English as a second language (ESL) classes, technology-training programs, and a component for academically talented youth. In addition, there are transitional school programs and many events-type programs such as the poetry slam, a writers' club, various counseling programs related to particular social problems, and our summer program.

NNewsline: Tell us about your job-training program.

Porco: Our current job-training program has two components. The first involves the use of Internet job bank listings. Through personal interviews, center staff help individuals profile their interests and skills and identify potential jobs.

The second layer of job development is through a more intense program. Through a grant with the Wisconsin Technical College System Board, we are able to perform pretesting to determine the basic educational needs of participants and then begin to provide GED training, ESL, and adult basic education. Once participants fulfill these requirements, they are then trained in high-technology computer applications to facilitate their skill development in areas of computer technology and various software programs, from word processing to intense graphics and video production. Programs such as Final Cut Pro, Adobe Illustrator, PageMaker, and Dreamweaver assist them in obtaining employment in the field of technology.



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Finally, those who complete the program and are seeking employment are assisted in interview techniques, résumé writing, and job searches on the various job banks. For those who want to continue with higher education, we provide scholarships and help them with applications and acceptance processes at various institutions of higher learning. Since we started this part of the program in September 2002, we have provided seven scholarships.

NNewsline: What were some of the challenges you faced in starting your job-training program?

Porco: Some challenges we faced were identifying employment partners willing to give long-term commitments and assistance, finding sustainable funding sources to maintain program consistency, and identifying and agreeing on program intent. Ours was not a job program for day labor. It was aimed at finding employment opportunities in corporations that had a future and paid sustainable wages and benefits, sustaining participants' interest in the program opportunities once they became employed, and removing the myths often associated with low-income individuals.

NNewsline: Based on your experience, what are the steps to developing a job-training program?

Porco: To develop a job-training program, centers should gather data from community members, both residents and employment groups, that identify needs, employment interests, potential employment opportunities, and skills necessary for job retention; identify the funding and staffing necessary to sustain a job-training program; seek partnerships with various public and private funding sources and identify the beneficial goals for each partner; ensure consistent program promotion within the communities; develop a depth of support services for the participants receiving the training, such as daycare, transportation, and onsite interviews; work with each employment group

to establish mentors to help new hires make any workplace adjustments; and develop a social contract with the new hires to report on their employment experiences. Use this contract to evaluate the need for further education and training, hold partner meetings to highlight success and evaluate improvements, involve family members in the process of nurturing and coaching the participants, and ask new hires to provide support for members in the program that have not found employment.

NNewsline: Why are Neighborhood Networks centers important?

Porco: Centers can be an invaluable resource for residents. They have the potential to transform a low-income housing community into an enterprise center with education and employment resources. Centers offer residents the opportunity to serve the larger community through resources that do not exist in the school system or at county job centers. They provide a way to channel government funding more directly to residents of low-income communities so they can develop enterprising solutions to many of their problems. Centers offer residents an opportunity to make contributions to each other and the larger community.

NNewsline: What advice would you give to centers that are considering such a program?

Porco: Centers should organize coalitions that can help secure resources for their programs. If possible, they should use the services of qualified residents to offset having their program run by volunteers and outside experts. They should build around their cultural strengths and integrity and canvass residents to solicit their input about program development and operation. Also, they should build the expectation of change into the equation and build flexibility into the design of their programs. Programs will come and go, some will be great successes, and others will not. ♦

Successful Interview Tips

Face it: A job interview can make you tense, nervous, frightened, and uneasy. However, it is an important step toward getting a job. A clean, professional résumé is a great asset, but employers do not want or need paper employees. That is why the personal interview is so important. Think of it this way: You are not being interviewed because employers want to trip you up or embarrass you, you are there because they need to hire someone. There are things you must do before, during, and after the interview to show that you are a capable, responsible, committed, and focused individual.

Before the Interview

Prepare. Because you want to succeed, you would not walk into an important exam without studying. So why arrive for a job interview unprepared and unfocused? Know the time and place of the interview; do not be late because you made a wrong turn or missed your subway or bus stop. Punctuality demonstrates reliability. Know the interviewer's name, including correct pronunciation and title. It shows professionalism.

Research. The Internet is an excellent source of information. Locate the company's Web site and explore it. Make good use of library resources. Read trade journals and business publications. Research the company's products and services and its present and future growth potential. Be clear about why you want to work there. This information gives you confidence that you can answer interviewers' questions. When you are confident about something, it shows.

If you are employed, remember to refresh your knowledge about your past and present employers.

Dress for success. Pay attention to all aspects of your grooming. You need and want to look professional and comfortable. Do not chew gum. Display good posture. Make eye contact and smile.

During the Interview

Expect to answer a variety of questions. This is where your research about the company can help. Be prepared to explain why you want the job, why you would like to work for the organization, what interests you about its products and services, where you would like to be in your career in 5 years and why, your weaknesses and strengths, how you deal with conflict, and your ability to work in teams.

Always ask questions and make sure that you have prepared them beforehand. You will sound confident, interested in landing the job, and articulate. Ask for a detailed job description. Ask about the company culture [what the interviewer likes about the company], induction and training programs, company growth plans, and best-selling products or services.

Closing the interview. If you are interested in the position, ask for it. If you are offered the position and want it, accept on the spot. If you need some time to think it over, be courteous and tactful in asking for time. Set a definite date when you can provide an answer. Thank the interviewer for his or her time and consideration.

After the interview. Send a personal letter to thank the interviewer for his or her time. ♦



Montgomery Townhouses (Managed by IRM) Neighborhood Networks Center.

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According to Jones, IRM planned its program so that it did not experience the problems with credibility and lack of training materials encountered by other organizations. "One major challenge for us was finding instructors with strong soft skills. Now we choose instructors who are sensitive, caring, and able to communicate with participants," she says.

"Our job-training program creates a win-win situation for property owners and residents," Jones adds. "These communities need a lot of help and direction in filtering residents into jobs. Onsite job-training programs offer a better opportunity for success than offsite programs because they cut down on barriers such as transportation and unfamiliarity."

Jones offers the following advice for establishing a successful program:

- ◆ Have ongoing networking with businesses and agencies of all types, from banks to corner stores.
- ◆ Do not place restrictions on jobs, because people have diverse interests.

- ◆ Ascertain the needs of the community by surveying and speaking to residents.
- ◆ Develop open and sustained communication with residents and have them help with planning.
- ◆ Determine which class times work for residents; this varies from site to site.

With 23 operational centers and 5 more scheduled to open in 2003, IRM serves low-income diverse communities on senior and family properties. ◆

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